

Little Kids in a Big World
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Once in a while back in the 1950s, the invitation from my Aunt Eileen over on Hilson Avenue would come to invite me to a weekend sleepover with my four cousins. Time spent at their house never failed to fill me with delightful anticipation for days in advance. At 7, I was the same age as their oldest daughter, Sandra. There were two boys, crabby Eric, six, and happy-go-lucky David, four, and the baby girl Anne Marie who was just a year old.

Their house was always lively, noisy and very busy. Meals often consisted of foods that were modern and quick to prepare. Catelli dinner was on the lunch menu, frequently followed by Royal Instant Pudding in my favourite flavour, butterscotch. These delicious meals were only occasionally prepared at my house. With no babies at home, my mom had time to prepare more traditional meals.

Anne Marie took up a great deal of my aunt's time, leaving the rest of us free to play outdoors for hours. Two seven-year-olds were plenty old enough to look after the little kids, and to walk them to the store at Clare and Kirkwood for some candy shopping. Normally that was a fine idea, but every now and then someone would go missing for a while.

“Where's David?” hollered Aunt Eileen out the window one summer morning as three of us were playing in the yard. We glanced around and shrugged our shoulders. “Well, go look for him,” she yelled. We searched the front and back yards, and looked around the next door neighbours' houses on both sides and across the street. Just then we spotted four-year-old David ambling home from a house two doors away with his usual happy grin.

“Where were you?” asked Sandra. “Mom told us to look for you.”

“I was helping Mrs Kelly hang out the clothes,” David explained as he scampered into the house. He was such a cheery, sweet child that no one could stay mad at him for more than a minute.

Eric disappeared one day just as we were called in for supper. We hadn't noticed him leaving, and did a quick search around the yard. When we shouted his name, we could hear muffled cries coming from somewhere underground. Moments later, Eric came crawling out of the culvert which ran under the laneway. He was covered in dust and dead leaves, and was triumphantly holding something in his fist. Someone had thrown marbles into the culvert and Eric came out with a handful, feeling as though he had won a prize. His wide smile turned into a scowl when he learned that he had to have a bath before dinner.

After our dinner of meatloaf, mashed potatoes and hateful peas, we gathered in the living room where my uncle Paul would read us a story. This was always controversial since we all had our favourites. Eric loved “Good Night Little Bear” and David always stuck up for his brother's choice. Sandra's pick was a book about “Punkinhead” a wooly-haired little bear who winds up in Santa's Christmas parade. Punkinhead was a mascot of the Eaton's store and Uncle Paul would try to imitate his voice when he read us the story.

After storytime, we'd all tumble into our beds where after a good deal of whispering, giggling and warnings from downstairs, we all fell asleep, dreaming about the next day's explorations and adventures in this exotic, far-off neighbourhood, blocks away from my house.